Get real: Set your own speed

D oes speed thrill or does speed kill? When it comes to maintaining greens, that is the central question. However, the answer is far from clear.

When we set out to write about putting green management for this issue, we were surprised at the hornet's nest of emotions that were stirred up when we posed that question to everyone from architects to superintendents.

The issue is so thorny we went through more industry insiders trying to get someone to weigh in on the side of speed than a porcupine has quills. In our GCN News poll, nearly 65 percent of respondents said increased green speed was bad for the game of golf.

Why, then, are superintendents continually lowering cutting heights and pushing their turf to the limit to get faster and faster greens when many of them don't believe in it? Because golfers and members demand them, that's why. As Kevin Ross notes in his story this month, mowing greens at 3/16 inch will get superintendents a pink slip these days (see story on page 8). Fast is fun and like rock 'n' roll, it's here to stay.

Many blame NBC announcer Johnny Miller for calling greens that are Stimpmeter at 12 feet slow. Heck, pin it on Augusta National for maintaining unrealistically slick greens. That's the reason members are quipping, "Green is good, but fast is better," and "I'd rather putt on fast dirt than slow greens," right?

Speed has clearly gotten out of control if superintendents are going low just to keep their jobs. But as we discovered in our reporting this month, it's not too late for superintendents to take control of speed and use the Stimpmeter to their advantage.

As Ross points out in his story, technological advances have made faster greens possible, but how low can you go? One way to escape the cutting height limbo is to take the Stimpmeter out of the closet (or buy one already) and use the damn thing. Follow the lead of Mike Morris at Crystal Downs (see story on page 1) and determine the optimum green speed for your particular course. By maintaining a range of green speeds day in and day out, Morris has eliminated complaints from members and come up with a realistic maintenance plan.

By keeping his greens within the optimum range, Morris has also gotten off the cutting height roller coaster. He no longer has to speed up greens for the member-guest and then field complaints from members when he goes back to maintaining "normal" conditions.

I know this is easier said than done. It will take more than a scolding editorial to affect change. Golfers need to have their perspectives altered for them. Michigan State University's Thom Nikolai is working on research that may do just that (see story on page 10). Under his proposal, we would no longer describe greens in terms of speed, but in terms of contour. Fast, medium and slow would be replaced with flat, undulating and severely contoured.

This change in thinking would take the pressure off everyone from architects to superintendents and give golfers a healthier perspective on the game. If we could only apply rational thinking to the distance debate...

David M. Smith